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May 4, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Acting Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, NW Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

I am writing to seek improvements to the grant application process for fire departments across this country during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We are experiencing unprecedented times, and we must ensure that we have every tool available to fight back. Unfortunately, I have heard that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grants remain burdensome, difficult to apply for, and have not been updated to reflect the new realities of COVID-19. I am asking that FEMA: 1) reduce red tape and simplify its grant application processes for the duration of COVID-19; and, 2) reopen grant applications that closed after March 1st, 2020.

We all know that our local fire departments are critical to maintaining the safety of our communities during this time. As the lead federal agency responsible for emergency preparedness, response and recovery, it is imperative that FEMA improve its grant process in order to provide adequate and timely assistance to those in need. You must reduce the excessive paperwork requirements for grants that are difficult, if not impossible, to complete during this pandemic.

I received correspondence from Fire Chief Justin Marshall of the Shenandoah Fire Department, located in my district. Shenandoah is a 90 percent volunteer department which covers approximately 200 square miles of fire district and protects an urban community of about 5,000 citizens. They have 27 hardworking volunteer firefighters, all of whom are working to respond to their community's needs during this outbreak.

The Shenandoah Fire Department recently attempted to apply for a Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER) grant. As you are aware, applying for a grant requires the assistance of numerous federal, state, and local agencies including the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) under the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Defense, FEMA, and the City of Shenandoah. The IRS, for example, is currently so overburdened with providing stimulus assistance to the entire country that calls and requests – even those made by Congress – are going unanswered.

The Shenandoah Fire Department had to complete their application three separate times because the City of Shenandoah did not show up when their DUNS Number was submitted. Each time they reapplied there was a 10-business-day wait, which resulted in more than a month of delays to submit their application. Additionally, they were left on hold waiting to speak with various administrators for over 12 hours, which resulted in more than a week's worth of work for some of these volunteer members who could then not complete their regularly assigned duties.

Additionally, the Shenandoah Fire Department was supposed to receive a CAGE Code from the Department of Defense, which never occurred. As of the end of March, they remain in the processing stage, and now the grant application has closed. This process prevented the Shenandoah Fire Department from applying for a much-needed grant. It is clear red tape and burdensome requirements prevented the Shenandoah Fire Department from being able to apply for and likely receive this grant.

As you are aware, the Shenandoah Fire Department is mandated by NFPA 1981 to replace their self-contained breathing apparatuses (SCBAs) within the next 2 years. Their current SCBAs will not be certifiable after this period. SAFER grants were purposely created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations to help them increase and maintain their departments in areas of need. Not updating grant requirements directly hinders and limits FEMA's ability to assist smaller, rural, and volunteer fire departments across the country.

That is why I urge FEMA to reduce red tape and simplify this grant process. It is unreasonable to expect all volunteer forces to be able to obtain all required paperwork during this global pandemic, particularly when we are acutely aware that the IRS and other federal departments are unable to provide assistance. I am also requesting that once FEMA reduces and simplifies its grant process, you reopen FEMA grant applications for fire departments like Shenandoah. Without these changes, states like mine could be left out of the grant process entirely.

I look forward to hearing how we can remove red tape for our smaller, rural, and volunteer fire departments in the grant process with FEMA and streamline these interactions across federal agencies.

Sincerely,



Cindy Axne

Member of Congress